



**DECORATION
FOR VALOR**

JOE CASSILLY

Decoration for Valor

Joe Cassilly

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*In Memory of Virginia Kirsch,
American Red Cross Doughnut Dollie
I met her in Cu Chi Viet Nam August 1970
Spec/4 Ronald A. Spudis, who was a friend and a hero
And Spec/4 Mayo McClinton, Jr., who was a better
friend than I knew.*

God keep them all.

“War spares not the brave, but the cowardly.”

—Anacreon around 500 B.C.

*Dedicated to my Diana,
whose love inspired the end of the book.*

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1

On Good Legs

Most of the patients on Ward 11 of the Walter Reed Army hospital suffered spinal cord injuries. A row of beds ran down each of the long walls. At 11:30 on Christmas Eve 1970, the ward was dark except for the colored lights on an artificial tree and a glow from the nurses' station.

I had elevated the head of my bed so I could watch the lights slowly hypnotically blink. Sleep would not come. I held my hand up in front of my face and concentrated on making a fist. My arm and shoulder muscles tightened, the fingers flexed slightly and trembled. The thumb hung away from my palm. The message from the brain never reached the hand.

"Please, God, if you're there," I said aloud. "I mean, I know you're there!" *Oh my God*, I thought, *I doubted God. There goes my chance for a miracle.*

"It would be a great Christmas present if I could just make a tight fist." I concentrated and stared at my fist as if my eyes could send the nerve messages that could not get past the bruise on my spinal cord. "Come on God, do this for me and I'll never think about sex and I'll become a priest," I bargained. I thought for a second and then said out loud, "Okay, I'll be a priest."

"C'mon, hands, damn it," I swore, as if the obstinate arm had ears and a brain and would perform like a trained pony. Nothing. I let the hand fall to my chest. There was no skin sensation or muscle control

from the armpits down. What had been pretty good muscles in the legs had atrophied.

I stared into the slowly blinking tree lights. My mind left my body's prison. I traveled back eight months from the cold, snowy darkness of Washington. I was standing on young, strong legs in the hot California sunshine along the Coast highway near Santa Barbara. The road burned through the soles of my boots. My feet itched and stuck to my socks. I would have taken off my boots and gone barefoot but I had enough to carry with my duffel bag.

The road was flanked with hitchhikers, thirty or more. They were laden with knapsacks, bags, bedrolls, and the rest of their possessions. I was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, but I felt out of place. My regulation haircut was in stark contrast to theirs. Some of the women had longer hair under their arms. My spit-shined boots and huge, awkward, olive drab duffel also marked me as military. Not that olive drab was out of place; the crowd looked like models of clothing for a military surplus store. The duffel made me so clumsy that I had missed several rides because of it. Cars chose to stop nearest the hiker with the least luggage. A seventy-pound bag seemed to scare drivers.

Suddenly there was the screaming of brakes as a car swerved to avoid a collision with an old Volkswagen bus that had roared from a garage across the highway. The bus came toward me and slid to a stop on the gravel shoulder, almost striking me. The woman driver leaned to the open passenger window and yelled, "Throw it in the back!"

I threw it through the open sunroof. She screamed, "NO!" and watched with a pained expression as it landed in an open space among stacks of boxes.

I opened the front door. She started forward. I ran beside and leapt into the seat. She jammed the bus into second gear and sped off before the swarm of hikers could envelope her car. I slammed the door, flopped back in the seat, closed my eyes, and drew a deep breath. She shifted into fourth gear. I opened my eyes and looked over. She had soft brown skin, black hair, and a thin pretty face with great brown eyes that so commanded attention that it was as if the rest of her face was designed only to frame them. Then, I became aware that I was being stared at. I turned and looked in the back but there were only stacks of boxes and an old suitcase.

My gaze fell into the space between the two seats. On the floor sat a child duplicate of the driver with the same big brown eyes. She regarded me with suspicion. The result of a runny nose had reached her lower lip. I arched out of my seat and dug a crumpled Kleenex out

of my pants pocket. I wiped her face. This service convinced her that I could be trusted. She climbed onto my lap, stuck a grimy thumb in her mouth, and laid her head on my chest.

“Why did you stop for me?”

“I was across the road at my uncle’s shop picking those up.” She tossed her head toward the boxes. “I felt sorry watching you stagger around with that elephant.” She meant the duffel bag.

“Yeah, but why pick up just me?”

“There isn’t room for anyone else. Those boxes are full of glass lampshades. By the way, I’m glad you didn’t smash the whole works, throwing that bag like that. You can pay for gas, can’t you?”

We looked at each other. “Yeah, sure.” I shrugged.

The bus had climbed several hills from the coast. Heat distortions danced above the hot road to an audience of tall brown grasses on either side. I watched out the window. There is something about a VW engine straining up a long grade that is hypnotic. My head snapped forward and opened my eyes. The lack of talk made me uneasy.

“What is the little one’s name?”

She looked fondly at the baby, who had fallen asleep. “Elana.”

“How old is she?”

“Two and two months. What’s your name?”

“Jake, Jake Scott.”

“Are you going to Fort Ord?”

“No. Oakland Army Base. I’m getting shipped overseas.”

“Vietnam?”

“Uh-huh. What’s your name?”

“Bibi.”

We drove on in silence. My eyes crept closed. I woke, trying to figure out where the hell I was. My shirt had lines of sweat and my back stuck to the seat. There wasn’t a drop of blood left in my butt; at least, I could no longer feel it. My pants felt wet. The sun hung over the Pacific Ocean and glared through the driver’s window. Bibi had taken off her shirt. Her naked breast showed through her fishnet tank top. She followed my stare to her bosom. She smiled, reached over her shoulder, and brought her long black hair forward so that it covered her.

“Where are we?”

“On a side road near Santa Cruz.”

“Can we pull over? I gotta stretch. My pants are soaked with sweat.”

“Oh no,” she whispered and laughed. She turned onto a narrower road.

“What’s so funny?” I wasn’t in the mood for inside humor.

“I’m afraid it may not be all sweat,” she said nodding toward Elena.

“You mean she isn’t housebroken?” My eyebrows arched.

“Well, sometimes when we are both bouncing in the car, we forget.” For the first time, we smiled at the same thing. The small road wound and dove toward the ocean and where the asphalt ended, the bus dropped down into two ruts, which woke Elena. She promptly popped her thumb back into her mouth.

“Where the hell are you taking me?”

“To my grandfather’s.”

By the edge of the ocean, I could see a long, low building built up on timber piling with a corrugated tin roof and wood plank walls. Elena looked up and took the thumb from her mouth long enough to say “Poppa’s” and wave in the direction of the shed.

“We can spend the night here and I’ll drop you off tomorrow.”

As we pulled up, Elena squirmed out of the front seat and ran, calling, “Poppa, poppa.”

I expected to see an old, bent Chicano. Instead, a tall, athletic man with silver hair emerged. The man swept Elena from her feet, tossed her into the air, and hugged her in a well-rehearsed motion.

“Bibi, I knew you would be stopping by today,” said Poppa.

“Poppa, this is Jake—Jake, Poppa.”

The old man did not acknowledge me, but put an arm around the woman and started inside. As they reached the doorway, Bibi turned and called, “You’d better bring in some dry pants.” They disappeared inside.

I dragged my duffel out of the back and started thrusting my hand into it. You know there’s something to be said for suitcases. You can lay them down, flip them open, and see just what you want. I didn’t want to unpack the whole bag just to find one pair of pants. I slid my hand down the side, stopping every few inches to feel the clothing. Raincoat belt. Patches on a shirt. Socks. Underwear. Shaving kit. I pulled that out. Then I began working my hand in again. When I was about to my shoulder, I felt belt loops. The stitching was jeans, not fatigue pants, and I felt the frayed edges of cutoffs. I slowly dragged them out, trying not to dislodge everything in the process.

My watch read 6:30. The sun seemed only an inch above the ocean, ready to ease in and set the sea boiling. I went inside. The front of the building had display space for all items that were Mexican: flags,

streamers, piñatas, costumes. No one was there so I walked through a door to the rear. The back was used for living space. There was one large room, half kitchen and dining table, half living room with a bed. Bibi and her grandfather were sitting at the table drinking iced tea, speaking in low tones. I stood there for a minute, hoping that someone would offer me a drink. The old man pointed to a door at the far end of the building. "There is a shower out there, go clean up." It was an order, not an invitation, to leave them alone. I kept going and found myself back outside, blinking at the sunset.

I was about to storm back inside, tell them both to go to hell, and start walking to San Francisco, but then I saw the shower. It consisted of a frame of two by fours with pieces of corrugated tin on three sides, strategically located for privacy. The water came from a garden hose with a spray nozzle. I looked both ways and saw only deserted beach so I got naked and started the water. It was a little colder than I wanted. I put a mirror from my shaving kit up on a nail and was concentrating on shaving around a mole on my neck when Bibi walked out. I shaved the mole off.

"Can't you knock, damn it?" I sputtered, holding a washcloth over my crotch.

"I came out to get your clothes to wash them with Elana's."

"Yeah, well that doesn't mean you can't knock." I tried to win the argument while feeling decidedly foolish standing there stark naked.

"Don't be a jerk."

"Wanting a little privacy isn't a sin."

"Look, you haven't anything I haven't seen. You'd better wad some toilet paper and stick it on your neck before you bleed to death." She grabbed my pants and slammed into the house.

"What a blabbering idiot I am," I swore at myself. In my fantasies, I had been naked with a beautiful woman. She had been overwhelmed with desire. Instead, I was humiliated by the fact that she could not have cared less. I had acted like a jerk.

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